

From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar

Kanpur holds special importance for the dalit movement since it was the cradle of the Adi Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh. This movement had a strong impact on dalits, especially in the years following Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. This article examines how Ravidas became the most popular saint among the dalits in Kanpur and how the dalits accepted Buddhism in the 1980s. It also explains the emergence of Navayana Buddhism, which was conceptualised as the total rejection of Hinduism and was institutionalised with a temple and a Buddhist monk, a governing body of lay persons and a canon of public and private rites.

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Every year in January/February 'jhankis' (floats) are carried through the streets of many towns of Uttar Pradesh in honour of Sant Ravidas, a Bhakti saint of the 15th century. Not only that, special trains full of pilgrims start from Jalandhar in Punjab and go to Varanasi to celebrate the Ravidas 'jayanti' (birth anniversary) there at the temple in Seer Gobarhan with prayers, speeches, music and communal meals for which all the poor and needy of Varanasi are invited. Sant Ravidas, the humble chamar shoemaker of the 15th century, has become the most popular saint in northern India. He was so pious and god-loving that even mother Ganga herself came to his aid. Born in the city of Varanasi and pursuing a polluting occupation he had such a great spiritual acumen that he became the guru of princess Mirabai of Chittorgarh.¹ Repeatedly he came in conflict with the brahmins but withstood all ploys and pursued his trade and his teachings.

In anticipation of the 50th anniversary of Bhimrao Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, a vivid discussion began in one internet forum on Ravidas identity in relationship to Buddhism.² It was argued that Ravidas was against the caste system and preached equality, and projected the same principles as Buddha did. Some discussants considered Ravidas to be a god who had even constituted a religion, others just held him to be a guru. The crucial point was to what extent the conversion to Navayana Buddhism, as formulated by Ambedkar, would mean to give up the veneration for Ravidas. Can Ambedkarites be Buddhists and Ravidasis simultaneously as some suggested, or is it incompatible with each other?

I will take this discussion as a starting point and show why Ravidas became the most popular saint among the dalits in Kanpur, and why the veneration for the two other Bhakti saints – Kabir (1398-1448) debatably a Muslim, and Shiv Narayan (1716-1790), a kshatriya from Ballia district, receded into the background. And finally, I will show how Kanpur's dalits followed a trajectory from Bhakti to Buddhism, or more specifically, from the teachings of Sant Ravidas to Navayana Buddhism. Bhakti is not only a devotional mode of veneration, but a broad religious movement which began in northern India in the 14th century. So-called poet saints or 'sants', emerged, who preached in the vernacular [Schomer 1987: 3]. They accepted women, low castes, untouchables and Muslims into their congregations. Their teaching was based on an unqualified monism, seeking deliverance – 'samadhi' – in one's lifetime through the union of the individual soul with the transcendental. Many of these sants were from low castes or untouchables themselves.

Golden Days of Kanpur's Dalits

Contrary to Nandini Gooptu's claim, that "bhakti re-emerged in the twentieth century essentially as a religious practice of the untouchables" [Gooptu 1993: 284], two Bhakti 'sampradayas' (sects) established themselves already around 1870. These were the "golden days" for Kanpur's dalits [Washbrook 1993: 77]. The British had not only decided to reconstruct Kanpur as a civic station after the devastation through the "first Indian war of independence", but were also expanding on industrial lines. Kanpur was going to become India's first industrial town, the so-called "Manchester of the East" [Froystad 2005: 43]. The nascent industrial town needed workers of all kinds. This opened up unequalled opportunities for dalits.

Kanpur was famous for its raw hide market, which mainly supplied Europe with hides. Europe had a nearly insatiable demand for hides and leather and India was the biggest supplier [Roy 1999: 157]. Hides and leather was considered to be polluted and therefore they were exclusively handled by Muslims and chamars [Deliège 1999: 84]. From all over Uttar Pradesh the chamars migrated to Kanpur, the kuril from the adjacent districts, the ahirvar from Bundelkhand, the dhusiya and the jaisvara from eastern Uttar Pradesh. They were bearing different names according to the regions and there was neither connubium nor commensality among them. In Kanpur town they became “tanners” – as the British translated their name chamar – what most of them had never been in the village [Briggs 1920: 57]. In the 19th century, hide and leather trade was far more important than any industry and it made some chamar comfortably wealthy [Crooke 1896: 191].

The Shiv Narayan ‘panth’ (path or religious congregation) was the first to present themselves in public with the construction of a beautiful temple in Kanpur. It was built in 1870 by Bihari Lal, a rich khatik building contractor. The Shiv Narayan panth had its followers among khatiks, dhusiyas and jaisvaras. All three castes were untouchables. Khatiks were vegetable vendors, bristle manufacturers and building contractors but only the building contractor subcaste were followers of the Shiv Narayan panth. Dhusiyas were cobblers and the jaisvaras worked in textile industry. Nowadays, the temple is even mentioned on Kanpur’s

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road-map as a ‘gurdwara’ (Sikh congregational hall). The gurdwara became the ‘samaj ghar’ (community centre) of the early dalit movement, where the caudhuries (headmen) of the different dalit There are many similarities between Sikhism and the Shiv Narayan panth. Both are ‘nirguna’ sants, following a spiritual conception of god. The holy book as an iconic representation of god is the centre of devotion. The Shiv Narayanis even call it Guru Granth Sahib, as the Sikhs do, or Guru Anyas [Bellwinkel-Schempp 2006: 18]. It is placed on the ‘gaddi’ (seat or throne) in their respective temples. However, the teaching is different. Shiv Narayan accepts the Vedas and the Vaishnava conception of rebirth whereas Guru Nanak does not. Sikhism explicitly refutes caste whereas Shiv Narayan does not. His teaching is full of Tantric images and employs the Upanishadic conceptions of world denial and renunciation. Besides, the Shiv Narayanis do not have a dress code or any sectarian marks.

The Kabir Panth had its adherents among the kurils and koris. Kurils are a chamar subcaste and in Kanpur they were associated with leather manufacturing, industry or trade. Koris were Hindu weavers and untouchables as well. The rise of Hulasi Das (1858-1929) from labourer to ‘mahant’ (priest) in the Kabir Panth is an illustration of an exceptional career, which was possible in those initial years of modern industry. The British were not benevolent masters. They enforced strict labour discipline [Joshi 2003: 144] while acknowledging excellence and expertise even among the dalits. That put them very much apart from the Hindu social order and its caste norms, which acknowledged only the value of the spiritual pursuits of the ‘savarna’ (caste Hindus) [Thorat 2004: 10]. Hulasi Das was a kuril and left his native village at the age of 10 to work as a coolie in Kanpur town. He entered the boot factory Cooper Allan right from its start in 1881. After nine years he became a ‘mistry’ (labour contractor, supervisor/foreman), which enabled him to build 18 houses, which he rented out to his labourers. In 1903, he resigned from his job, because he took his ‘panja’ (letter of authority) as ‘mahant’ of the Kabir Panth. His house became the most prestigious Kabir ‘mandir’ (temple) in Kanpur. According to the saying of Kabir, god neither resides in a mosque nor in the images of Hinduism [Hawley 1988]. God is ‘nirguna’ (beyond form and image), and salvation can only be gained through devotion. Therefore, the house of a Kabir Panthi was considered to be the temple of Satguru Kabir [Bellwinkel-Schempp 2002: 221].

In those days, the Kabir Panth was so popular, that it even caught the attention of an Anglican missionary, George Herbert Westcott, who wrote the first comprehensive book on Kabir and the Kabir Panth in 1907. The Kabir Panthis followed strict rules of purity and pollution. Commensality and endogamy within the panth were preferred. The commandments of honesty, faithfulness, cleanliness, education and a self-reliant income were of great importance. They were vegetarians, forbade the intake of any intoxicants and followed the doctrine of ‘ahimsa’ (nonkilling). According to M N Srinivas, this can be interpreted as an element of Sanskritisation [Srinivas 1996: iv].

Kanpur’s Kabir Panthis were followers of the Dhamakhera branch in Chhattisgarh who believed that Kabir was an ‘avatara’ (incarnation) of the supreme being [Thukral 1995]. Kabir is eternal and equal to Satyapurush, the primordial man or ineffable divine essence. With him is the Svayamveda “the self-existent Veda” out of which all four Vedas emanated. This belief was enacted in their religious function, the ‘cauka’ (quadrangle, square) which was held on all major lifecycle rites, and at least once a year. It was a private religious function, which demanded an elaborate ritualism.

Raidasis

Around 1900, Ravidas became increasingly more popular [Briggs 1920: 210]. A number of chamars began to call themselves Raidasis. To call oneself Raidasis was a means to escape the denigrating name chamar and to show the veneration for Ravidas openly. In Kanpur, the kurils established a caste association and called it after Ravidas. In 1925, Swami Achutanand (1879-1933) arrived and made his home in Kanpur. He was a jatav chamar who grew up in the cantonment in western Uttar Pradesh and joined the Arya Samaj. Disgruntled with its discrimination against untouchables, he left and deliberately chose the nom de plume of 'a-chut' (meaning not polluted), "the one who was in a state of purity" [Khare 1984: 84]. He built up the Adi Hindu movement in Uttar Pradesh, reversed the so-called "Aryan theory of race" [Bayly 1999: 127], and claimed that the untouchables were the highly civilised and peaceful original inhabitants of India who used to rule the country. They were subjugated and enslaved through the Aryan conquest. That theory was nothing new or original. The Adi Andhra, Adi Karnataka and Adi Dravida movements in south India [Omvedt 1994] and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab [Juergensmeyer 1982: 46] developed similar theories.

Besides, Bhadant Bodhanand Mahasthvir (1874-1952) in Lucknow propounded the same theory [Sathi 1999]. He was of the view that the 'mulnivasis' were the original inhabitants of India, comprising of untouchables and backward classes [Kshirsagar 1994: 403]. His manuscript 'Mul Bharatvasi aur Arya' ('The Original Inhabitants of India and the Aryans') got never published, but his theory influenced his disciples and followers and the coinage of the term 'mulnivasis' had a lasting impact [Kumar 2006: 66]. Excavations at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, which began in 1921 and were in full swing in 1926-27, were appropriated and used to legitimate Adi Hindu theories.

Achutanand made Ravidas the flagstaff of his movement as the Ad Dharm had done in Punjab at about the same time. Kanpur had a number of different chamar subcastes with different regional traditions, which lacked a common identity. But his effort to forge an identity was meant to include all untouchable castes. Achutanand brought the 'caudhuries' of the untouchable castes together and through 'canda' (collection) a small temple was built in Harbans 'mohalla' (ward) in 1924. This ward was predominantly inhabited by kurils. Not only that, Ravidas temples were also built in Etawah, Lucknow, Allahabad and Ayodhya.

Achutanand also introduced the Ravidas 'julus' (procession) in honour of Ravidas' jayanti (birthday) in January/February. This procession was the first "public arena activity" of the dalits in Kanpur [Freitag 1989: 241]. It went through the whole of old Kanpur and was a blend of political demonstration and temple ritual. It led them out of the confines of their wards into the realms of civil society. Caste Hindus considered their procession provocative because it went through their neighbourhoods, it was accompanied by drum beating and singing, and it was a considerable impediment to traffic. They thought it cumbersome, noisy, and impertinent. Achutanand projected the theory that Bhakti was the original religion of the Adi Hindus [Jigyasu 1960: 113]. Achutanand, however, remained rather vague about it, simultaneously identifying

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Shiva as the original godhead of the Adi Hindus and the egalitarian religions Buddhism and Jainism on the same level as Sant dharm (religion of the saints). Time frames and historical sequences were not defined and a similarity or even likeness between Sant dharm and Buddhism was suggested. It shows the labile character of these religious theories, historical projections and political constructions. The theory of the Swayamveda, that Kanpur's Kabir Panthis propounded, might have suggested such a construction.

Achutanand founded the Adi Hindu Mahasabha ('Association of the Original Hindus') in 1925 as a political wing of his movement [Gooptu 2001: 173]. His closest followers were the elders and educated among the dalits, predominantly those who were in remunerative professions like contractors, shoe manufacturers, hide merchants and bristle manufacturers. Many of those Adi Hindus called themselves 'bhagat', which showed their devotion to Ravidas. Besides, bhagat became a title as well designating the members of the Adi Hindu Sabha. When Achutanand died in 1933, one of the most colourful figures of the early dalit movement, Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900-1971), returned to Kanpur. Medharthi belonged to a backward caste. He got educated at Gurukul Gangri, the Arya Samaj vernacular reform school. Medharthi married out of his caste, studied Ayurveda and joined the national movement. When he finally came back to Kanpur, he was a Buddhist. He set up a school for the depressed and backward class children at the outskirts of Kanpur and modelled it after Gurukul Kangri. Caste was not observed, all children had to do manual work, wash their cloths and clean their rooms. Medharthi took a universalistic approach towards religious education and drew from all religious denominations and sects of those times, but predominantly from Sant dharm, namely, Kabir.

In 1939, Medharthi wrote a booklet *Bharat ke Adimvasi Purvajan aur Sant Dharm* ('The Original Inhabitants and Ancestors of India and the Sant Religion'), in which he reworked the Adi Hindu notions. He considered the

vedic religion as the unjust and oppressive religion of the Aryan invaders. Depressed and backward classes were the 'purvajanas' (men born before, or men of pre-historic age). Achutanand's Adi Hindus and Bodhanand's 'mulnivasis' were purvajanas for him. They were the ancient rulers of the country.

In his opinion, the Sant religion was the original religion of the purvajanas, actually the 'sanatana dharm' in the understanding of ancient. The Sant dharm spread the message of equality, morality and communism. Then he juxtaposed Buddhism with Sant dharm. He argued that Lord Buddha had recognised all Sants as 'buddha' (learned). Through this etymology, the Bhakti saints became equated with Buddha. Buddha was actually a follower of Sant dharm because whatever he preached was orally transmitted and was written down by his disciples hundreds of years after his death. This is why Medharthi closed his argument with the plea that the followers of the Sant dharm should pay special attention to the messages and preachings of Buddha [Medharthi 1939: 11].

Medharthi's school was also visited by Ambedkar in the 1940s [Bellwinkel-Schempp 2004: 235]. Medharthi became Ambedkar's Pali teacher and used to go to Delhi regularly over the weekends. At that time Ambedkar was labour minister in the viceroy's council. Ambedkar's visit to Buddhपुरi is hardly known amongst the dalit community, because there was a much more prominent event. It was the second meeting of the Scheduled Caste Federation, which took place in Kanpur on January 29, 1944.

The praise goes to Ram Lal Sonkar, a khatik bristle dealer, who called Ambedkar to Kanpur under this condition: that he should organise a communal meal to overcome casteism. Ambedkar held one of his most radical speeches on this occasion, projecting that in "Free India, we will be the Ruling Race" [Das 1969: 77]. This was a reference to the Adi Hindu theory, that the dalits were the original rulers of India. Politically, the meeting was a success, all the prominent dalit leaders attended and it was a "mammoth gathering" [Keer 1990: 362]. But socially it was a failure. The communal meal took place but subsequently many of those who attended got ostracised by their respective castes.

An important element in the formation of a dalit identity was Ram Charan Kuril's (1882-1956) book on Ravidas, called *Bhagvan Ravidas ki Satya Katha* ('The True Story of God Ravidas'). Ram Charan modelled Ravidas dharm on the Judeo-Christian tradition. The book was written in 1941 and is the "first modern Indian study of Ravidas" [Callewaert/Friedlaender 1992: 27]. He proposed that the *Ravidas Katha* was meant to replace the *Satyanarayan Katha* of brahmanical Hinduism.

Kuril's hagiography used the common motif that Ravidas was born in a family of poor chamar who lived in Benaras. Kuril painted Ravidas as a cobbler, who is god-loving and generous. There is no mention of a previous birth as a brahmin. Ravidas was well versed in the Vedas, Shastras and Upanishads and won every contest against the brahmins, because his learning and his devotion was greater than theirs. He was a contemporary of Kabir and he became the guru of princess Mirabai of Chittorgarh. In Kuril's hagiography Ravidas was depicted as a contemporary of Kabir and Ramananda. Ramananda was painted as a brahmin who was disgusted with caste pride, inequality and empty ritualism. When he met Ravidas, he felt happy to have found somebody so selfless, pious and truthful with whom he could reform society. These two were depicted like colleges of different status, the one Ramananda a brahmin, and Ravidas, an untouchable.

Ambedkar converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956. He had designed his Buddhism with a holy book, a conversion ritual with 22 "Buddhist Oaths" and a dress code [Zelliot 1992: 215]. While swearing these oaths, the convert should reject Hindu deities as well as rituals and fight for an equal and just society. Ambedkar meant his Navayana Buddhism – as it is nowadays called [Jondhale/Beltz 2004] – to be a total rejection of Hinduism. To abjure Hinduism was for him the only solution to escape the caste system and establish equality.

Agra's dalits responded to Ambedkar's mass conversion drive in 1957 and subsequently removed the Hindu deities from 22 temples and converted them into Buddhist temples [Lynch 1969:149]. In Lucknow, the successor of Bodhanand, Bhante Pragyand, organised conversion ceremonies to Buddhism in 1957 [Bellwinkel 2004: 237]. Nothing of that kind happened in Kanpur.

The 1950s and 1960s were a time of optimism, industrial expansion and intellectual fermentation in Kanpur. For the second generation of educated dalits, there were new openings in government service, education and politics through reservation. Many of those who had been members and supporters of the Adi Hindu Sabha first joined the Scheduled Caste Federation and became members of the Republican Party later, which was designed by Ambedkar, but only got established after his death in 1957. Politically, they became Ambedkarites but socially they still follow the Adi Hindu notions.

However, these fermenting years after independence saw an explosion of Ravidas veneration in Kanpur. Small community

temples as well as private temples sprang up, noteworthy in Idgah, where Adi Nagar, as the name suggests, had been a stronghold of the Adi Hindu movement. These temples were built by members of the new dalit "middle class" as Nandu Ram called it [Ram 1988: 117]. This Ravidas veneration went side by side with the veneration of the 'devi'. Contrary to kuril's intentions, Ravidas did not replace mainstream Hinduism, and Ravidas temples were just added to Kali temples.

A striking example of that kind is the temple built in the courtyard of the house of Girdhari Lal in 1961. He was a rich leather merchant, and a close follower and patron of Achutanand. The temple has the form of a triptych and is made out of concrete. In the centre is a Kali statue, to her right a representation of Hanuman and to the left a small cell with the statues of Buddha, Ambedkar and Ravidas. The cell has three walls, a roof and an open front. The left wall bears an image of Buddha, placed midway in an elevated position. At the back wall of the cell Ambedkar is depicted sitting on a chair. To his left Ravidas sits cross legged on the floor. His right arm is raised and in front of him is a pair of sandals on which he works. He seems to be teaching and working simultaneously. Ambedkar and Ravidas are put centre stage, the modern and the medieval are depicted in their very specific cultural mode. Ravidas succumbs to Ambedkar to the same extent as tradition gives way to modernity. Buddha is present in an elevated position, but on the side.

At the same time, Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu (1885-1974) reworked, systematised and streamlined the Sant dharm theory and popularised it in many publications. He was a close follower of Bodhanand and founded a printing press, the Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan (Publishing House for the Welfare of the Multitude). Its low priced (two anas) booklets had a wide circulation and were eagerly read by the dalits. He reworked the notions and projections of the early dalit movement and linked them up with Ambedkar. He himself had converted to Buddhism through Bodhanand.

In 1956, he published his booklet *Sant Pravar Ravidas Saheb* ('The Most Excellent Saint Ravidas'). He praised Ravidas as a role model of a spiritual leader who had risen from among the chamar. Under the impression of Ambedkar's conversion, he urged the dalits to abandon Hinduism and to embrace Buddhism. He moulded Ravidas' life after Buddhist legends and traditions. However, he repeated that Buddhism and Jainism sprang from Sant dharm for which "there is absolutely no evidence" [Lochtefeld 2005: 212]. In his biography of Achutanand, written in 1960, he was more cautious and suggested a similarity in principle between Buddha and the Bhakti saints. Buddhism and Bhakti were both preaching human equality, they were adverse to the caste system ('varna' and 'jati'), they did not rely on any book of revelation and they were against violence. Both were spiritual religions and an equation between the 'sunnyavada' doctrine of Buddhism with the 'nirguna' conception of Sant dharm was suggested [Khare 1984: 31]. He held that Buddhism and Bhakti were the 'sanatana' religions of the dalits. Therefore, conversion was not necessary. "The preaching of Panchsheel by Lord Buddha (to give up theft, lie, intoxicants, adultery and violence) are the foundations of the Adi Hindu principles and the original human culture of India" [Narayan and Misra 2004:121].

The Ravidas julus in those days was the main religious and social manifestation of dalit unity. Ward committees were formed, which decorated the floats with the statue of Sant Ravidas or produced "living images" [Niehoff 1959: 53]. The Samta Sainik Dal (Fighters for Equality), the youth organisation founded by Ambedkar, marched up. Gates were erected in the name of Ambedkar, Achutanand, Ravidas, Kabir, Balmiki and Supa. This was the creation of a dalit pantheon to abridge caste divisions prevailing between chamars, koris, balmikis, dhanuk and dom. It linked the pan Indian political dalit movement as represented by Ambedkar with Bhakti saints and modern myths of the legendary founders of the sweeper castes [Prashad 2000]. The respective ward committees put up these gates and there were halting points for the procession, which was welcomed by the elders with tobacco, pan and cigarettes.³ The procession started from the Ravidas temple in Harbans 'mohalla' and took a six-hour route through the small streets of the interior of town to immerse the statue at Bhagwat Das Ghat with a final meeting in Phulbag.

The Shiv Narayanis responded with a procession on Shiv Narayan's jayanti, which was shorter. It stopped in 1961 when, due to the Indo-Pakistan war, all processions were forbidden, and it was not resumed afterwards. For an inwardly oriented religiosity without any specific social message, it was difficult to prosper in independent India when issues of political empowerment of dalits were at stake. However, Beni Madhav Sonkar, a khatik primary school teacher, undertook the enormous task to publish the 15 books of Shiv Narayan with a Hindi commentary in the 1960s.

The Kabir Panthis felt the need to withstand in independent India. Most of the erstwhile rich Kabir Panthis, the leather merchants and traders, had folded up their business. Lacking rich patrons, the public recognition of the panth fell. The eminent Kabir mahant Prem Das, Hulasi Das' son, felt the need to lead the Kabir Panth into the modern world. He initiated three All India Kabir Conferences in 1969, 1971 and 1973 to achieve a unification in ritual and to increase the popularity of the panth. Upon his death in 1974, this endeavour stopped. Kanpur's Kabir

Panthis lost their leading figure, and the panth most of its members.

In 1967, Rajendranath Ahirvar (born in 1929) established the Bharatiya Bauddh Mahasabha (Indian Buddhist Association), which linked the Republican Party politics with Ambedkar's teachings. Ahirvar was a government employee and a dalit activist. His father had been a close follower of Achutanand and he grew up with the early dalit movement. He became a fervent admirer and follower of Ambedkar. He joined the Republican Party right after its inception and converted to Buddhism in 1961. A brilliant orator, he held regular meetings in different mohallas, usually on Sundays, spreading Buddha's and Ambedkar's teachings.

From 1975 till 1985, Ahirvar was the president of the central Ravidas Julus Committee in Kanpur. At that time the route of the procession got enlarged and took a new course. Many dalits had moved to south Kanpur. These were included in the julus and the Idgah colony became an important halting place. For Ahirvar, Bhakti and Buddhism had the same objective, they rejected the caste system, had an egalitarian message and preached truthfulness, honesty, non-violence and vegetarianism. But it became clear to him that Sant dharm only evolved after the Buddhist period. Studying Kabir, he resolved that Kabir had taken Buddha's teachings through the times of resurrecting Hinduism a theory, which is also suggested by Linda Hess [Omvedt 2003: 213].

In those years, the veneration for Ambedkar became increasingly more important than the veneration for Ravidas. Ambedkar was seen as a saviour, who gave India a democratic and socialist constitution and institutionalised reservations for dalits in education, politics and government service. Although educated dalits were the first beneficiaries of those reservations, the veneration for Ambedkar was unanimously supported by the dalit

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working class also. However, politically they complied with the trade unions, which made no mention of caste or Ambedkar.

Public representation of Ambedkar only began with the installation of an Ambedkar statue by Jagjivan Ram in 1973 in Nana Rao Park. From this date onwards, Ambedkar jayanti was celebrated with an ever-increasing splendour there. The statue was erected in Nana Rao Park, an historical and highly symbolic place. Nana Rao was the freedom fighter who led the "first war of Indian independence" in 1857. Only after independence he was rightly recognised as an heroic "freedom fighter" when the Memorial Gardens, which the British had set up to commemorate the victims of the so-called Massacres of Cawnpore, were transformed into a memorial of the freedom struggle. Ambedkar had symbolically moved at the centre stage of India's heroic freedom fight.

Dalit Acceptance of Buddhism

The 1980s began with a mass conversion drive by the newly established Dalit Panthers. What is noteworthy in this respect is that the option was open for a conversion into Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism. It was a radical move, which soon got banned by the police, hence gained even more popularity. Although the press stubbornly referred to them as "Harijans" through this move the self-referential name dalit became popular. The foundation of the Buddhist 'vihara' (temple) in Juhi was equally revolutionary. It began with a move of dalit activists to clear a piece of municipal land. They built a wall around and erected a shed with two rooms. One was a shrine with the statue of Buddha, the other a living room. Later, an assembly hall was also added. Besides, the whole construction got legalised and is nowadays run by a trust.

In 1984, the then president of the Bharatiya Buddh Mahasabha (Indian Buddhist Association), Kanpur branch, Durga Prasad, published on the occasion of Ravidas jayanti a little pamphlet under the title: 'Bauddha dharm se Prerit Sant Ravidas' (Sant Ravidas was inspired by Buddhism). Although Ravidas was born into a low caste of chamar, he was full of self respect – 'svabhimani' – and had no inferiority complex – 'hin bhavana'. In spite of his social obligations, he criticised the 'savarna' for their arrogance, pretensions and haughtiness. ... "Sant Ravidas was against the caste system. He neither believed in the vedas nor in gods like Vishnu or Mahesh. He only believed in the absolute 'brahma', which he called Ram in his impersonal form, not the son of Dasrath. Ram was unperceivable – 'alakh', faultless – 'niranjan', without form – 'nirakar' and without colour – 'nirup'."

Ravidas was presented in the nirguna tradition [Callewaert/Friedlander 1992: 83] what the author considered to be akin to Buddhism.

In the mid-1980s, Kanpur's Buddhists went for Vipassana retreats of 10 days, in Kanpur and in the surrounding cities. Igatpuri, where S N Goenka had opened his Vipassana centre in 1976 [Kantowsky 2003] was too far away and too costly. Besides, in Kanpur a Vipassana centre opened in 1986. Every Saturday morning, Vipassana meditation is offered and 10 to 15 men and women regularly attend. Most of them are dalits, usually educated men beyond 50. Some of them claim to be Buddhists while others deny it. Vipassana religious practice is very much contrary to Ambedkar's teachings. He clearly refuted the notion that Buddhism has anything to do with

samadhi or Vipassana, or esoterism. According to him, Buddha had this worldly understanding of salvation, free of superhuman agency [Ambedkar 1957: 225].

The 1990s were a time of radical social and political change in Kanpur. The mills closed and the working class resorted to vegetable vending and what they called “private labour”, meaning employment in the unorganised sector. The Shiv Narayan Panth lost its patrons as well as its followers. The so-called “post Ayodhya riots” of 1992 swept away the last remnants of the Adi Hindu ideology of the so-called peace-loving and non-violent original inhabitants of India. Perpetrator of that three-days nearly unrestrained murder of Muslims was a khatik swine herder and a BJP corporator [Brass 1997: 228]. This was particularly painful because a khatik had called Ambedkar to Kanpur in 1944. Dalit self-perception as well as unity was severely damaged by his incident. Suddenly, the erstwhile independent and self-reliant shoe manufacturers saw themselves as “broken people” – dalits, crushed and denigrated. Globalisation and the booming leather industry in Muslim hands made it obvious that they had missed the train to prosperity long time back. They refused to qualify in their traditional craft and rather moved into white collar jobs. Therefore, the qualified positions in leather industry, be it as technicians, supervisors, chemists and sales managers got filled by savarna for whom leather was no longer polluting. Besides, it became increasingly more difficult to get into white collar jobs even through reservation, as there were less openings, more competition and more corruption. They had to fall back on their traditional occupation as cobblers, edging out a precarious living, producing sandals for the Indian market. According to the Census of 1991, Kanpur had 1,253 Buddhists. But there are many more who follow Ambedkar’s Navayana Buddhism. They belong mainly to Kanpur’s new dalit middle class who are bank employees, lecturers, employees in the telephone exchange, teachers and clerks with the municipal corporation and doctors. Besides, quite a number of dalit IAS and IPS officers have also become fervent Navayana Buddhists, supporting the Navayana Buddhism with their donation and even establishing Buddhist centres themselves. The traditional elites – the sons of the elders, who were close followers of Achutanand – have also changed to Navayana Buddhism.

They hold that Navayana Buddhism has a rational and scientific approach to religion. The core teachings are the rejection of superstition, the rationality of insights and the internalisation of beliefs. The most frequently quoted line from Ambedkar is “In his (Buddhas) opinion, nothing was infallible and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to re-examination and reconsideration whenever grounds for re-examination and reconsideration arise” [Ambedkar op cit: 89]. Believe only in those doctrines, which you have scrutinised and of which you are totally convinced. The followers of Navayana Buddhism have refuted Hinduism and the caste system, the concepts of karma – fate – and rebirth with the same zeal as Ambedkar. They are aware of the danger of appropriation through Hinduism. The political discourse instigated by the Sangh parivar – the Hindu fundamentalists – centred around the question of whether Buddhism is a part of Hinduism or not. They have vehemently rejected those insinuations. Any efforts to appropriate Navayana Buddhism stir up highly emotional discussions. Conversion to Buddhism means the total rejection of Hinduism and the caste system. Buddhists, they assert, have lost their caste-specific identity. Buddhists marry other Buddhists as well as other “Hindu” dalits. Buddhists are neither constituting a caste nor a sect, but are still open to both sides. As much as they refuted any effort of appropriation from the side of the savarna, they likewise treated with compassion their own less enlightened dalit brethren who followed a different religious path.

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In the 1990s, small Buddha statues were erected in dalit mohallas. The popularisation of a dalit iconography began with Kanshi Ram (1934-2006), the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984 [Pai 2002: 93]. He popularised the heroes and social reformers of different dalit castes. Later on, when BSP came to power and Mayawati, a close associate of Kanshi Ram, became the first dalit woman chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1995, 1997 and 2002-03, she created Ambedkar villages, Buddha Parks and Ravidas ghats – (embankments), etc. The symbols and heroes of the dalit movement were put up at prominent crossroads. Dalitness had moved out of the segregated ward into the open society at large.

The Ravidas julus was still a major annual festival and had a political and social message. In 2000 floats with living images showed the atrocities inflicted on dalits like rape and murder. The everyday impediments and obstacles, which burdened dalits’s lives like corruption, nepotism and the increasing rejection of applications for reserved positions in government positions were shown and enacted. A banner showed Guru Nanak, Ravidas, Ambedkar and Buddha side by side who were akin in the rejection of the caste system, notion in the equality and their teaching of love and compassion especially for the dalits.

The social message of Navayana Buddhism was fully implemented with a new institutionalisation, ritual and public representations. The vihara at Juhi with Bhadant Dipankar had become a community centre with regular

prayer meetings, a governing body of lay persons who function as patrons and who donate liberally to the Buddhist course. The religion was merged with the political and social aspects. Mass conversions in 1995 and 2001 served political ends and were a clear signal against Hindu appropriation and a claim for justice, equality and brotherhood. Mass Buddhist weddings with usually 11 couples were meant for the poor and less enlightened. Rich patrons sponsored the household goods. Communal meals on each function fed the hungry.

Private and public Buddhist rituals streamline life and the yearly cycle. Of those the Ambedkar jayanti, the birthday celebration on April 14, the Buddh jayanti, end of April, the Diksha Divas (conversion day on October 14) and Paranirvan Divas (Ambedkar's death anniversary on December 6) are the most important. The most spectacular is the Ambedkar jayanti with the central celebration in Nana Rao Park under the Ambedkar statue. It has become the most important "public arena activity" with a julus through the whole of Kanpur [Jaoul 2006: 182]. It is a blend of mela (fair), 'satsangh' (congregational meeting of believers) – and 'langan' (communal meal).

In 1999, the Ambedkar jayanti began early in the morning with a prayer meeting at the Ambedkar statue. Monks and laymen alike chanted the prayers in Pali. Women were dressed in white saris to show their Buddhist laywomen status. After the chanting, Ambedkar's statue was garlanded. Spectacular processions were carried out through the whole city of Kanpur linking different dalit mohallas with the festivity in Nana Rao Park. The park was full of booths of different jatis, organisations and political parties. At mid-day there was a communal meal, meant to feed at least 10,000 people. The afternoon was meant for family recreation and for festivity. And it went on till late at night.

Conclusion

Bhakti had its very distinct theology, social practice and membership among Kanpur's dalits. Two different Bhakti sects, the Kabir panthis and the Shiv Narayanis established themselves around 1870. When Ravidas became popular through Swami Achutanand and Ram Charan Kuril, it was primarily as a "public arena activity", which was also an expression of social protest and the beginning of dalit assertion. Although Ram Charan Kuril formulated a Ravidas religion, which was meant to replace Hinduism, it was not successful. Initially in the religious garb, the Ravidas Julus established a common identity among all dalit castes. From the 1950s onwards it broadened its pantheon and included many more cultural and political heroes of dalit castes. From the 1980s onwards, the Ravidas julus changed its course and floats from south Kanpur have been taking part. The representations of the floats got increasingly politicised and expressed the grievances and aspirations of the dalits.

Kabir panthis and Shiv Narayanis had their specific theology, which was inwardly oriented and could not be transformed into a public arena activity. Their message remained confined to the religious realm. When the veneration for Ravidas became increasingly politicised, the teachings of Kabir and Shiv Narayan receded into the background. Besides, when the leather trade folded up and the mills closed, the Kabir panthis and the Shiv Narayanis lost their patrons as well as their members.

The notion that Sant dharm was the original religion of the Adi Hindus was formulated by Achutanand, systematised by Medharthi and popularised in the 1960s by Jigyasu. It had such a strong impact on Kanpur's dalits that especially in those years after Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism the veneration for Ravidas flourished. "Why convert to Buddhism when Buddhism is an offshoot of Sant dharm?" was the underlying rationale. The Sant dharm ideological construction hampered the introduction of Buddhism. Contrary to Ambedkar's conceptualisation of Buddhism as a total rejection of Hinduism, Kanpur's dalits just added Buddhism to the prevalent veneration for Ravidas and the devi. Hinduism was not abjured, but amalgamated with Ravidas and what they thought to be Ambedkar's Buddhism.

It took a long time until Navayana Buddhism got firmly established in Kanpur. This was only possible after time frames and teachings of Ravidas got revised. Eventually, Ravidas was considered to have transported Buddhist thoughts through the times of resurrecting Hinduism. Ravidas dharm, or the remnants of it, became reformulated and Ravidas was seen as a Bhakti saint, who had been inspired by Buddhism. This is also what today other dalit authors like Kanval Bharati and Mahesh Dahiwahe hold [Zelliot Mokashi-Punekar 2005: 255]. Although Buddhist public arena activities have become institutionalised, the Ravidasjulus is still an annual event, uniting all dalits, especially those who are economically not so successful.

Only in the 1980s Navayana Buddhism became institutionalised with a Buddh vihara, specific public and private rituals and public arena activities. Finally, Navayana Buddhism was seen as a social protest and as the only alternative to subjugating and enslaving Hinduism. Kanpur's practising dalit Buddhists on the other hand feel a need for meditation. Their Vipassana meditation, which Ambedkar rejected as esoteric and unnecessary religious practice, is for them an interior purification. They do it "to clean their mind" as they call it in the understanding of a famous line of Ravidas: 'Man changa katauti men Ganga' ("When your heart is clean, then god will come to you"). It is not any longer samadhi – (deliverance), the mystical union of 'atma' and 'brahma' as in Sant tradition. It is a method to set the mind at peace. This

enables them to act in the world with compassion, detachment, righteousness and truthfulness.

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Notes

1 Winand Caellewart and Peter Friedlander are cautious in this respect. They hold that Ravidas “initiated a high caste woman devotee from Chittorgarh” (1992: 78) and leave it open whether this was Mirabai or Queen Jhali. I am following the narrative of Kanpur’s chamars who hold that Mirabai was the disciple of Sant Ravidas [Bellwinkel 1980: 209].

2 See dalit conference@googlegroups.com Sent: Tuesday, July 18, 2006 7:58 P M Subject: Ravidassia Identity – Let’s discuss and nail it down.

3 The description is taken from a short article ‘Tribute at Your Noble Feet’, which described the Ravidas julus in 1956.

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